

## AGE OF DIASPORA: IRANIAN SENIORS IN TORONTO

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OLD AGE IS VALUED AND VARIOUSLY defined in different cultures. Despite socio-economic and cultural advances in liberal democracies, and institutionalized state responsibility in providing care for elderly citizens, old age generally seems associated with negativity. Aging creates many pressures and anxiety for the aged and different sorts of concerns for the society at large. Despite semantic changes in the way older citizens are identified and addressed, and regardless of some attempts at putting a positive spin on old age, anticipation of one's older years is a daunting prospect for most people. The ever-growing age-prevention industry, including sophisticated cosmetic techniques for refuting the encroachment of age, reflects the perception of aging as an affliction in advanced capitalist societies. While the popularized market for products that help push back age-related defects speak to the release of the middle classes in these societies from bread-and-butter worries, it also has something to do with the politics of aging, how society perceives and treats old people and how, in effect, they perceive themselves. The negative delineation of old age is therefore understandable, as aging, for the majority of people, involves loss of occupation, social status, and valued functions within the family and society. More often than not, aging involves poor health, scant resources if not utmost poverty, abandonment, withdrawal, a sense of uselessness and, sometimes, senility.

In her book, *Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir rejects the idea that everyday life for the aged is easier because they are no longer required to work, and that they can let go of their obligations and devote themselves to "the delights of inaction." This is untrue, she says.

The society of today, as we have seen, allows old people leisure only when it has removed the material means for them to enjoy it. Those who escape utter poverty or pinching want are forced to take care of a body that has grown

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frail, easily fatigued, often infirm or racked with pain. Immediate pleasures are either forbidden or parsimoniously measured out: love, eating, drinking, smoking, sport, walking (de Beauvoir 1972: 448-449).

For de Beauvoir, only a privileged few can avoid this situation. The majority, being relegated to "the fringe of humanity," become social outcasts, and this has serious effects upon their mental states, causing neuroses, melancholia, depression and cessation of life altogether. De Beauvoir acknowledges that old age does have certain advantages, as the old person no longer has to please anyone and worry about public opinion; she can at last be herself. Still, she draws a negative conclusion from the positive outcomes of age, identifying the coming of old age as a semi-death (de Beauvoir 1972: 539).

Others have noted that over time, as a result of dramatic social and economic changes, societal attitudes towards the aged have also been transformed. That is, there has been a shift from respecting, honoring and valuing old persons to an attitude of contempt, aversion and neglect. In this period of frantic change, wrote Malcolm Cowley in 1980, when "memories have become irrelevant, experience is less valued than youthful force and adaptability," when childlessness, impermanency of marriages prevail and neighborliness is a fading ideal, one can predict lonely age for the now young (Cowley 1980: 34-35).

To be sure, as a result of unleashed market forces, economic instability, structural inequalities, consumerism, and skewed social policy, people's attitudes towards older people are undergoing change in Eastern cultures, such as Iranian also. For example, anecdotal testimonies abound about the increasing difficulty of life for older people in Iran : how their access to reasonably good health care is slipping farther away; how the rising costs of living and unreliability of hiring helpers have increasingly made it difficult to care for ailing parents in the family; of family quarrels over who should take care of parents who can no longer live by themselves; how sprouting retirement and nursing homes are replacing the care of the extended family; and how depositing the elderly in institutions no longer brings social stigma, condemnation and disgrace to the children, as it used to. Hence, the popular blessing of the old people for the youth in Iran, *pir-shi* (*may you reach the old age*) that reflected a positive understanding of old age may no longer be a blessing at all.

Nonetheless, getting old does not constitute as much of a calamity in the East as it does in the West. It is not the terrible *infliction* that older citizens have to endure and the society has to tolerate and worry about. The insubstantial state responsibility towards older citizens and spares social services certainly mitigates against too much concern and too many debates over old age and the costs of elderly care for the society, not to mention that life expectancy in non-Western societies is lower than that in the West. Compare for example, differences in life expectancies in the North and the South, as reported by the UNDP Human Development Report (2007-08): Bangladesh (63.1), Pakistan (64.6), Iran (70.2), India (63.7) and Sierra Leone (41.8) to name a few. Compare these figures with those in a few advanced capitalist countries such as Japan (82.3), Canada (80.3), Sweden (80.5) and US (77.9) and United Kingdom (79

years). However, the fact remains that in many Eastern cultures age adds to one's standing within the family and community, particularly if financial means are not at issue. For example, loss of desirability and interest in sex, the source of sorrow, anxiety, and preoccupation for women and men in consumer-ridden, youth-oriented Western societies is seen as liberation, particularly for women, in many cultures. Or menopause, which Germaine Greer suggests, is an utterly negative experience and a source of continuous grief because of a combination of ageism and sexism in the West (Greer 1993: 251), is in fact an empowering experience for women in the Middle East, liberating them from the confining sexist and patriarchal rules of moral conduct that restrict their life choices. Seeking advice and blessing from older persons, behaving in a respectful manner in their presence, or simply providing them with the best or most comfortable seats at family gatherings are norms in Middle-Eastern cultures. Respecting and assisting the elderly are moral and religious obligations and are taught to children at an early age (filial piety). It is quite rare for an elderly person to live alone, feeling bored and purposeless, or to consider residing in a nursing home a normal stage of one's life. The latter, in fact, reflects a family's despair and dramatic economic decline and social crisis.

Now the question is whether this positive perception about old people and the psychological security that it gives older citizens travel to the new country when people are dislocated from their birthplaces. Hardly, for example, it is not hard to imagine how negatively Canada's older citizens are affected by alarming reports about the growth in the senior population; the dwindling economic resources for elder care; and many commentaries about the terrible burden the 'sandwich generation' endures in caring for elderly parents, or reports of elder abuse in nursing homes. Most likely all these take away older citizens' psychological and emotional comfort, their sense of confidence and entitlement to care and respect in a society to which they have given their whole lives. Presumably, the elderly immigrant of color takes to heart these commentaries and reports much more than their Canadian-born counterparts because of social and cultural exclusion and covert and overt racism.

What follows is an attempt to glimpse the experiences of this group of citizens through the windows of oral interviews conducted in Toronto with Iranian seniors who had lived in this country between five and ten years. The sixteen face-to-face interviews with Iranian seniors conducted in the summer of 2004, as well as some of the data extracted from 450 survey questionnaires and interviews conducted with Iranians in both Toronto and Montreal as part of a research project among four communities of Muslim cultural background, form the basis of this essay.<sup>1</sup>

## OLD AGE AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

When in the mid-1980s I sponsored my mother to come to Canada as a landed Immigrant, neither she or I thought that she would actually take up residence in Canada at such an advanced age. The idea was to save her the cumbersome process of getting a tourist visa each time she wanted to visit us.

The idea of sponsorship was prompted by the experience of her first visit here, when she got sick with a terrible back pain, her visa expired and an Immigration Canada employee in Kingston, where we lived at the time, had to come to her bed to verify her identity and condition and renew her visa. But these unforeseen circumstances changed almost a decade of her resistance and my reluctance to see her leave her birthplace forever and she finally landed in Canada as a permanent resident with no hope of a return that must have been clear to her.

I have often thought about this painful departure and landing. Watching how within two years of her immigration my mother's health, good humor, sense of confidence and eventually memory failed, I often wonder about the punishing experience of migration at an advanced age. How could the entry into a realm of cultural and social isolation, loneliness, lack of companionship of people of one's age or at least the possibility of having basic communication with other people in the larger society, and being at the mercy of busy, tired and impatient children, not affect a parent's physical and mental health? I have wondered if the love of one's children and the desire to live closer to them would compensate for all that is lost when one leaves behind one's birthplace, independence, the precious emotional and psychological security that a person feels from simply living in a known and familiar habitat in the company of those who know her and her history and speak her language, literally and culturally – something that one is not conscious of until it is lost. Which would be more depressing and disorienting: separation from the loved ones or living with the sense of loss, isolation, dependence, and resignation that comes with being relocated to a new country as an older adult? Or should we begin with a more general question: are the emotional and psychological impacts of aging universal, or do race, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status have an impact on how people age?

In 2001, Canadians 65 years of age or older were estimated at 3.92 million and the number was expected to grow to 6.7 million in 2021 (Government of Canada 2002: 3). The change in fertility rates since 1945, which at present is below the rate of natural replacement of the population, and an increase in life expectancy, are factors that make the senior population a fast-growing section of Canada's overall population. In 1997 only a small percentage (three per cent) of newly arrived immigrants was reported to be over 65. And in 2001, eight per cent of family reunification immigrants were seniors (McPherson and Wister 2008: 42).

Mark Novak and Lori Campbell report that 71 per cent of older immigrants in Canada come from Europe. The size of an immigrant group, the proportion of its population aged 65 and over, the housing concentration of the group and their urban/rural location, as well as its cultural values, are mentioned as factors that affect the kind of support and community life for the elderly (Novak and Campbell 2006: 68-69). A comparative study of community support-service used by Caribbean and Chinese seniors in Toronto support this claim (Lum and Springer 2004: 2-4). The study found that the larger size of the Chinese population in Toronto, and its higher level of social connectedness and housing concentration, act in favor of Chinese seniors, making it easier for them

to access support services compared with Caribbean seniors. The Chinese seniors, despite greater disadvantages in language and literacy, are said to be better situated to find out valuable information about support services through their community and social networks, whereas the Caribbean seniors, smaller in size, tend to find out about the same services through formal methods such as posters, outreach literature and television. The hypothesis of the researchers in this study is that "an institutionally complete, well-established ethno-racial community with a higher 'capacity,' in contrast to a smaller, less well-established one," is in a position to provide support and care for the emerging needs of its seniors (Lum and Springer 2004: 2-4).

Another study among Arab-American elders in Michigan points to language acquisition as a critical factor for Arab-American immigrant elders' sense of well-being, as lack of it not only impedes their meaningful interaction with the larger society, but also with family members, in particular with the younger generation (Ajrouch 2007: 167-82). The study notes greater vulnerability of elder immigrants and a lower level of life satisfaction compared with their counterparts who were born in the United States.

To these factors one should add the importance of family and family ties and the stronger hold of cultural values and family honor among ethno-racial minority groups, along with values regarding the care and treatment of the elderly. Hani Fakhouri's study of older Arab American adults in Michigan, where more than 300,000 Arab-Americans reside, emphasizes the moral, social, and economic obligations expected from children with regards to their parents, and the legal and religious importance of filial piety in the traditional Arab family. Hence, 90 per cent of the elderly who still live with a spouse have family members – children, siblings, nephews, nieces –who live nearby. However, the study also notes the changing circumstances and conditions of life in Diaspora and the fact that many of these values and customs may not endure due to financial constraints under which the needs for elder care become greater than families can provide (Ajrouch 2007: 170). This is a fact that Mary E. Hegland's study of older Iranian Diaspora in northern California confirms. Hegland points to the high level of respect and deference for the elderly and the central position of grandparents in the family circle in Iran, and how these values are played out among Iranian-Americans in California. Most Iranians, regardless of their social status or ideological and political stands, Hegland writes, idealize treatment of and respect for the elderly and the devotion of children and grandchildren to their parents and grandparents, and think of it as a main dividing line between Iranian culture and 'morally corrupt' Western culture (Hegland 2006: 205-219).

However, she notes the new realities faced by many Iranian elderly in northern California who emigrated from their country to be closer to their children. That is, they have become disappointed as they no longer enjoy the great respect and devotion of their children and their grandchildren. "Unhappy about unfulfilled expectations, and unwilling or unable to try to develop or seek substitutes, new occupations, new relationships, new sources of gratification, or new ways and resources to fulfill needs and wants," writes Hegland, they may

'become sunk in depression, bitterness and despair,' and this may even ruin their relations with children and grandchildren (Hegland 2006: 217).

## IRANIAN SENIORS IN TORONTO

Even though the migration of Iranians to other countries has a historical precedent, until 1978–79, Iran had never experienced massive emigration (*mohajerat*) of its citizens from their homeland. Also, unlike some other countries in the region, Iran was not a producer of migrant labor, and in fact during the economic boom of the 1970s it received thousands of migrant workers and professionals from Afghanistan, South Asia and the Philippines. The present size of the Iranian migrant population dispersed around the world, the diversity of the reasons for departure, the class composition of the immigrants, and the countries in which the Iranians land have been unprecedented in Iranian history.<sup>2</sup> Generally, the main reason for emigration of Iranians has been dissatisfaction with the social-cultural transformation of the country after the 1979 revolution, and in some cases, political or religious persecution and repression following the formation of an Islamic state in the country. This has been also the main reason for the arrival of the majority of Iranians in Canada. In our sample of 450 male and female Iranians in Toronto and Montreal, for example, 42.86 per cent of Iranian men and 26.63 per cent of Iranian females noted political persecution as the main reason they had left their country of origin. Even 'finding a better future for children' as the main reason for emigration that was mentioned by a larger percentage of Iranian migrants (46.75 per cent of men and 60.87 per cent of women) was closely linked to the political situation in the country.

In the period 1971–1980, the number of Iranians in Canada was less than 5,000. The 2001 Canadian Census reported the number of Iranians in Canada to be 88,225, a 17.65-per-cent increase. In our sample, only 2.6 per cent of men and 1.09 per cent of women said they had come to Canada in the 1970–1979 period, as opposed to 44.81 per cent of Iranian men and 60.87 per cent of women who arrived between 1990 and 1999. In 2001, fewer than 5,000, or about 5.6 per cent of Iranians, were 65 years of age and older.<sup>3</sup> The 1996 census had recorded Iranians of over 60 years of age to constitute 6.5 per cent of the total of 62,385 Persian-speakers in Canada (Rahnema 1999). This decline in the percentage of seniors in the population speaks to the increasing numbers in younger age categories who have departed the country since 1996.

The overwhelming majority of Iranian migrants to Canada live in Toronto (41,295 people), of which in 2001, only 1910, or 4.62 per cent, were over 65. The Iranian community is quite diverse. Class, ethnicity, rural/urban origin, the level of education and types of occupation, past and present, sharply divide the community and affect its members' level of adjustment to the new conditions and inevitably, their sense of self-confidence, life satisfaction and need for care, either within or outside the family. Not unlike other immigrant communities, Iranians are divided foremost because of political views and positions vis-à-vis the Islamic government and ethnic belongings (Kurds, Azari,

Baluch, etc.), as well as by their financial resources. Our sample of Iranian elders in Toronto was drawn from the senior population who came to Canada as older immigrants as well as those who have aged in diaspora. They all are financially less privileged, with Old Age Security or disability payments being their only source of income, regardless of whether or not they live alone or with their families. Their regular association with three modest gathering places for the Iranian seniors in Toronto— Iranian Senior' Association, Iranian Women's Association and a church in the Sheppard and Don Mills area, where the sample was drawn from— to a certain extent reflects the reality that these associations are their main and, in some cases, their only means of socialization and entertainment.<sup>4</sup> The church does not constitute a formal place of gathering but is where most Iranians live and where a group of Iranian seniors regularly gather to socialize, play cards, have an hour-a-week ESL lesson or engage in other pastime activities that are organized by an Iranian social worker.

Regardless of the social, cultural and (past) class differences of Iranian elders, with rare exceptions they all, even the individuals who live with or close to children, suffer from a sense of isolation and loneliness. There were no observable gender differences in this experience. The following statements reflect this reality:

I have always felt depressed after the death of my daughter. But my depression got worse, because I am far away from my family and relatives in Iran. (She lives with another daughter in Toronto). (Female respondent)

I try not to be depressed. I have always fought against sadness and depression...But I feel really lonely in Canada, especially after I separated from my wife. Also my relatives are all in Iran...I rely on my children and only use government services if it is absolutely necessary such as [for] housing, ESL classes and for old age pension...Our needs are numerous, but most importantly it is our loneliness. (Male respondent)

I live with my son [but] it is not a very comfortable situation. Loneliness is a problem [as well as] dependency. I do not have an independent place of my own. (Female respondent)

I can say my main problem is loneliness and lack of good Iranian friends. However I keep my sanity by reading...sitting and complaining can change nothing. I also don't like to hurt my children by being sad or depressed. But I feel very depressed when I think about my fate. I do not know why all these tragedies happen to me. [One of her sons

disappeared in Pakistan over 20 years ago, after escaping Iran, and was never found]. (Female respondent)

I miss my relatives and friends in Iran. Do not look at our smile and laughter. We are very sad. It is very hard to adjust to this culture. We are strangers here. I can say that loneliness is the most important source of my problems. (Male respondent)

I feel depressed in Canada. The reasons for it are illness, lack of knowledge of Canadian culture and its language and lack of social relations with the society at large and being responsible for the entire family. [This person's main source of income is his own life-savings.] I can work and like to be active, but adjusting to the new culture and learning a new language is not easy. (Male respondent)

It is reasonable to assume that level of education and class status play a role in the level of adjustment to life in Canada and, consequently, the sense of isolation and helplessness of the interviewees. Only three out of 16 individuals had college education; the rest had a high-school diploma or less. Having language facility determines a senior's interaction with the larger society and meaningful communications within the family, particularly with the younger generation. Except for three respondents who spoke some English, which made it possible for them to take care of their own needs in terms of visits to doctors' offices or government agencies, they all relied on their children's assistance for interactions outside the community. In a society in which material wealth plays such a huge role in one's standing within the society and is used as a measurement for "success," having no or minimal financial resources and being dependent on others for basic needs negatively impact on one's sense of confidence and self-worth and, seemingly, the way one is treated by children and grandchildren. In fact, the 'cultural gap' between generations was a recurring theme in all interviews, even though some of the respondents took this as a fact of life and accepted it as the inevitable result of relocation at an advanced age. Two sets of responses below are indicative of differing attitudes to this gap:

I am not happy living in Canada. I am poor and alone in this country...We worked very hard to come to Canada, [but] I lost my family here...I see cultural differences between my children, my grandchildren and myself...The young generation does not respect us anymore. They avoid interacting with us. They do not feel commitments to anything. They stop respecting you when they realize the parents do not have any money to spend on them. (Male respondent)



I see cultural differences between my grandchildren and myself. They can only speak English. They cannot speak either Persian or Armenian. I like to see them speak Armenian. It makes me sad to see these differences. Even my own kids do not speak Armenian anymore. I have been depressed in Canada...loneliness, lack of support and worries for my two kids who are still in Iran [are the source of my depression]. I have no one to help me here. (Female respondent)

I feel the cultural gaps between my children, my grandchildren and myself. Canadian culture is not like Eastern cultures. For example, children do not learn to say 'hi' and 'bye' to elders in this culture. They do not know how to be courteous and pay respect to us. I always fight with my grandchildren that they should not be rude. I feel depressed seeing these differences and I feel lonelier as a result. (Female respondent)

I see many cultural differences between my grandchildren and myself. I cannot talk to my grandchildren at all. I cannot guide them. They do not let me. In Canada, kids take their own parents to court... I feel a bit sad seeing these differences. The kids should appreciate their parents. Even if we stay in Canada for a hundred years, we are still in exile. (Male respondent)

It is interesting to note that the last respondent was also unhappy about what he called "women's power" in Canada:

Everything in Canada is good except for one thing. Here women have all the power. The government should give more power to me. If you look around most women are divorced from their husband[s].

Still, some interviewees accepted the "cultural gap" with good humor and as a fact of life, even though they did not fail to mention it as a factor in their sense of loneliness:

I feel cultural gaps between my children and myself. Iranian culture promotes love and closeness. It is different here, but these differences do not make me depressed. It rather motivates me to learn the Canadian language and culture in order to get closer to my children and grandchildren. I also

like to transmit Iranian culture and language to them. (Male respondent)

I see a cultural gap between my children and grandchildren and myself...But I think this culture is ahead of my culture. People like me usually kept to our own culture and do not explore Canadian culture. But our kids are not like this. I have accepted that our kids should be raised in and by this culture. My way of dealing with these differences is to allow them to live their own lives and not interfere with their affairs...I don't try to learn their ways. I just live my life and let them lead theirs. (Male respondent)

I do not feel cultural differences between my children and myself. I raised my kids in modern Western style. Therefore, I have no problems with their lifestyle here. (Female respondent)

I see cultural differences between my children, grandchildren and myself. But I see it as a positive thing and accept it. I do not have any irrational nationalist fervor. I think Iranian culture has some positive aspects. But Canadian culture also has very good elements. I want my children to have whatever is good from both cultures. (Female respondent)

What is remarkable, however, despite a sense of isolation, financial need and decline in their social status, the overwhelming majority of the seniors, both women and men, did not regret having come to Canada. It is important to note that this relative satisfaction with life in Canada was also expressed by Iranians of other age groups whom we interviewed in our study of four immigrant groups of Muslim cultural background in Canada (Iranians, Afghans, Palestinians and Pakistanis). The great majority of the respondents from the four communities (70 per cent), despite their dissatisfaction with low levels of occupational and economic achievement and social exclusion, thought the decision to migrate to Canada was the right one.<sup>5</sup> This clearly shows that the most important questions facing migrants and refugees in Canada are practical. Two recurring themes in the Iranian seniors' interviews, for example, were financial hardship and loneliness as a result of not being able to enjoy the company of peers. They all emphasized their wish to have a formal and permanent gathering place with basic, government-funded services such as ESL classes. Such services, they thought, would reduce their dependency on their children for companionship and for practical assistance when they needed to go to doctors, hospitals or relevant government agencies. The following excerpts from the interviews confirm this reality:

Life in Canada is not comparable to the life I had in Iran. Still I am happy for the fact that in Canada I have the right to breathe, to live and to be free. I would be happier if financially I was in a better situation. I wish I had more access to government services and could speak better English. (Female respondent)

I am happy living in Canada. I could be happier if I were less lonely and had more access to senior services. (Female respondent)

I am happy living in Canada. I have never been depressed in Canada and I will never be. I read a lot and listen to Persian radio. This way I keep in touch with Iran. (Male respondent)

Canada is a very good country. I like the freedom in this country. But I could be happier if I were healthier and [had] more access to senior services. My wife spends most of her time with me. She is my friend and my companion. (Male respondent)

I am happy living in Canada. However, I wish I were less lonely and I could speak better English so I could be more independent. I also think more access to senior services could make people like me live happier in life. The other factor in a better and happier life for us is that we need a warmer, kinder and a more supportive community. (Male respondent)

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Whether one accepts Simone de Beauvoir's pessimistic portrayal of old age as a period of sadness, withdrawal, disinterest and decline, the only advantage of aging and becoming a "social outcast" being freedom from social obligations and the yoke of public opinion, or Germaine Greer's optimistic depiction of aging as a time of serenity and power, of opening the eyes of the soul and freedom from exaggerated feelings, the fact is that older immigrants, more than Canadian-born elders, are ill-equipped for the social, economic and cultural pressures of old age. There is a significant difference between getting old in a country in which you were born and raised, to which you gave your life and from which you deservedly expect respect, care and compassion, and arriving in a new country in which there is nothing for you to take pride and little chance to live a peaceful, decent, dignified life.

Many Iranian seniors in our sample have experienced political persecutions first-hand themselves or because of their children's political activities. Some have lost their children in the process or gone through the agonizing experience of having to hide their children for long periods in Iran or to send them out of the country without any guarantees of success. It is no surprise that anxiety, distrust and persecution mania are widespread among them. The expectations of elderly immigrants, whether they have come to Canada in an advanced age or have aged in diaspora, are generally more limited than those of their children and grandchildren. Hence, the sense of contentment of living in Canada that was expressed by Iranian seniors could be read as lack of a sense of entitlement, reduced expectations and resignation. Elder immigrants are not troubled by experiences in the job market, lack of connection between their education and their work, or whether they feel they are treated fairly and decently on the job and in the society at large. Their wishes are more modest. Having a decent income that would provide them the possibility of living independently, having access to decent health care and the possibility of socializing with people of their own age are what they see as preconditions for a life of contentment and dignity.

A major concern of the Iranian seniors in our sample, for example, was the idea of being an imposition on their children in the management of their day-to-day lives because of their lack of language skills. They emphasized that they try hard to take care of their health as they don't want to burden their children with their health problems. Many said they have reduced their expectations and have brought down their expenses in order not to live beyond their income. This flexibility and resourcefulness, which becomes an existential part of the lives of all dislocated individuals, help them to survive and keep their dignity and sense of honor. But poor housing, insufficient health services and drug plans, which that they partly see as the result of their lack of knowledge about available government assistance programs, were a major concern to them. They complained that they don't have a voice: government agencies do not listen to them; they have to wait for two or three years for a bachelor apartment; no one tells them what is available and what is not; even when they find these services through word of mouth they have to ask for a translator, or their children have to take time off work to accompany them; available services are scattered around the city and access to them requires spending money on transportation.

The majority of Iranian seniors whom we interviewed were physically fragile. They seem to have nothing in their present life with which they can identify themselves. They have 'nothing left to win and nothing to lose.'<sup>6</sup> Hence, they fall back upon their past. But even for this sad comfort they need to be around people who share similar needs. At the same time, the older Iranians show much flexibility and realistic expectations, and they are very practical, with modest solutions for their problems. Having a drop-in centre and a permanent organization for Persian-speaking seniors, with a referral service and Persian-speaking social workers, was a recurring theme in the interviews. For now, the possibility of living with or close to their children and enjoying the occasional company of other Iranian elders may protect the Iranian seniors from

falling into total withdrawal and despair. However, in the end, when institutional care is required, families have no other choice but to turn to government institutions regardless of whether or not the culturally sensitive services they need are available. This is the case as the Iranian community in Canada itself seems not to take the needs of its older members seriously and to make a serious, collective effort in addressing the urgent needs of its older members. This is despite the fact that the community is not short of wealthy individuals who could contribute financially to this endeavor by sharing a tiny part of the fortune that as developers and businessmen they have made in this country.

To be sure the experiences of Iranian seniors are not unique and in fact are reflective of the feelings, perceptions and needs of older citizens in other ethnic minorities. These include more efficient services for senior citizens; reliable translation assistance; more accessible methods for providing information about available government services; and sufficient, culturally diverse home care and nursing homes with native-speaking caregivers. These are basic human rights. Providing the possibility for its senior citizens of living a dignified life, – without the need to apologize for entering ‘the country of aging,’ – is the main measure of a compassionate society that values human life.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. The project, 'Diaspora, Islam and gender' (2001-05), supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Major Collaborative Research Initiative (MCRI), focused on four communities of Muslim cultural origin—Afghans, Iranians, Pakistanis and Palestinians in Canada and in four other locations, Britain, Iran, Palestinian Territories. The results of this study are reported in Haideh Moghissi, Saeed Rahnema, Mark Goodman, *Diaspora by Design: Muslims in Canada and Beyond*, University of Toronto Press (In press). The oral interviews with Iranian seniors in Toronto were conducted in Persian by Victoria Tahmasebi and Nazli Kamvari. I am thankful to them. Also, the support of the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is gratefully acknowledged.

2. The first major migration of Iranians was that of the Zoroastrians to India (now *Parsis* in *India*) in the seventh century following the Arab-Islamic invasion. In 1907, after the newly established Iranian parliament was abolished by Mohammad Ali Shah's Kazak forces, parliamentarians and intellectuals formed the first wave of political refugees, escaping to Baku, Tiflis and Ishq Abad in southern Russia. Within a few years, when the Constitutionalists won the battle against the monarch for a constitutional government, the refugees returned. The second substantial exodus of Iranians occurred immediately after the Second World War, following the defeat of the Azarbaijan Democratic Party and the collapse of the Iranian Azarbaijan Republic, when thousands of Iranian citizens including many Iranian Azari and Kurds escaped to the Soviet Union. These were political activists, mostly leftists and nationalists. They were joined in later years by other dissident intellectuals, who fled political repression following the CIA-led military *coup d'etat* in Iran in 1953. Many of these refugees returned to Iran during the 1979 Revolution, only to be forced to escape yet another form of despotism and political repression, this time effected by the Islamists. In total, exiled and self-exiled Iranian nationals around the world is estimated at two million. For more details see Haideh Moghissi and Mark J. Goodman (1999) "'Cultures of Violence' and Diaspora: Dislocation and

Gendered Conflict in Iranian-Canadian Communities.' *Journal of Humanity and Society*, 23 (4):297-318.

3. The statistical profile of Iranians in Canada in this section is taken from Diaspora, Islam and Gender Project, York University, (2005 ) *Selected Communities of Islamic Cultures in Canada: Statistical Profiles*.

4. The Iranian residents of Richmond Hill have managed to establish a drop-in centre for Iranian seniors.

5. This reality has been discussed in Haideh Moghissi, S. Rahnema, M. Goodman, *Diaspora by Design: Muslims in Canada and Beyond*. University of Toronto Press (In press).

6. Simon de Beauvoir recalling what Sartre told Andre Gide after the latter won the Nobel Prize (see de Beauvoir 1972: 489).